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ABSTRACT

A study used comparison-group methods to examine the effectiveness of dialogic journal writing in a content area classroom. Subjects were students in a sophomore-level course in Chinese literature at the University of California, San Diego. Students were divided into three comparison groups each of which was further divided into sections. Four teaching assistants (TAs) led section discussions and each TA taught 2 or 3 sections of 12-15 students for a total of 10 sections in all. Students in three of the sections kept dialogic journals (where they wrote about lectures, readings, and their previous journal entries); students in three other sections kept "academic" journals (a set of 18 writing activities designed by the researchers); students in the remaining four sections did no journal writing at all. All subjects wrote two essays, a few brief film reviews, and a 3-hour final essay exam. Each final essay was scored three times: for quality of argument, for sophistication of claim, and for the amount and quality of relevant evidence. From these three scores two more were created: an average score and a weighted score in which quality of argument weighed more than the other two. Results indicated that students keeping an academic journal outperformed (on all five measures) students keeping a dialogic journal and students keeping no journal, even after controlling for students' class level, gender, and which TA led the discussion section. Students in the dialogic journal group performed no better than students in the group not writing a journal. Findings suggest that students can demonstrate their learning of general education courses through discipline-appropriate writing if they are taught how to do it (using the academic journal writing activities). Findings also suggest that the results from comparison-group studies can contribute to reasoned argument about designing courses and giving writing assignments that will foster all students' learning. (RS)

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COMPARISON-GROUP STUDIES: ONE WAY OF LEARNING ABOUT WRITING-TO-LEARN[1]

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I'm delighted to be part of this soon-to-be published collection. I admire Charles and Anne's broad view of how we might learn more about writing in the disciplines. I also must say that they brought extraordinary intelligence and persistence to this project, helping all of us authors refine our ideas, while keeping us aware of the goals of the project and even allowing us to read the other essays in the sections where our chapters appear.

Today I want to preview the research project and the report for this collection that Susan MacDonald and I completed together[2]. Susan was the principal investigator, and I was her assistant. I want to do more than preview our contribution to the collection, however. I do want to entice you to read our chapter, but I also want to use this occasion to argue for the importance of comparison-group studies of what students may gain from particular writing-to-learn activities.

Comparison-group studies test claims about programs, courses, and particular instructional strategies. I don't consider comparison-group studies to be research. To my way of thinking, research in composition studies inquires into fundamental processes of writing and learning and seeks to describe and explain characteristic performances of writers and learners, in the university and elsewhere. Such research may inform program planning, course design, or assignment-giving. Comparison-group studies may then permit one special kind of evaluation of course designs and assignments.

Comparison-group studies are not experiments; they do not take place in labs. They are empirical, like surveys, case studies, ethnographies, and discourse analyses; but they are neither scientistic nor positivistic. I believe they provide irreplaceable information about groups of students. So long as we plan courses for groups and give groups the same assignments, I believe we should evaluate learning in groups.

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[1] A talk given at the annual convention of Conference on College Composition and Communication, Cincinnati, March 19, 1992. Do not cite or quote without permission of the author.

[2] MacDonald, S.P. and Cooper, C.R. (1992). Contributions of academic and dialogic journals to writing about literature. In A. Herrington and C. Moran (Eds.). Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines. New York: Modern Language Association. (To be published in August.)

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I'm aware that empirical research and quantitative studies have been under heavy bombardment by scholars in the humanities, as well as more recently by social scientists who advocate qualitative evaluation. Karen Schriver has provided the counterarguments for those of us who continue to value empirical research. I'll add that a comparison-group study cannot pretend to offer definitive answers to questions about instruction in writing. It does not offer to predict what students anywhere and everywhere might do; instead, it tries to explain what one particular group of students achieved. It is no more generalizable than cases or ethnographies, but it may be just as suggestive. It contributes only one kind of evidence in our continuing discussions about the role of writing in learning. Though we have a temporary consensus about its design, no one would claim its methods are anything but clumsy. It is not going to be taken seriously unless it evaluates actual learning situations, among real students and teachers. It will never be published these days unless its outcome measures come from humans reading actual written discourse. Its only current pretension is to reduce learners' confusion, wasted time and effort, and pain by improving course designs.

These are more than enough generalizations about comparison-group studies for now. Let me tell an abbreviated story about one, the story that will be told in full in Anne and Charles' collection. This brief story will also provide a context for further comments I want to make about studying writing-to-learn.

The story begins with dissatisfaction Susan MacDonald and I felt with essays students were writing in lower-division general education courses at UC San Diego. Susan was supervising TAs and coordinating section-work in large, lower-division lecture courses which were part of the general education program in our residential college Third College. Course lecturers were faculty in the humanities and social sciences. In each course students wrote two or three essays with revision. Since we were also coordinating a stand-alone first-year composition course which relied on systematic invention work prior to drafting, we began speculating about equivalent preparation for essays in these academic courses. We had been following the literature on writing-to-learn, and we were aware of various proposals for journal work. We were impressed with claims being made about dialogic or double-entry journals but disappointed to find theorizing limited to James Britton's speculations about expressive writing. The dialogic journal certainly looked attractive: it is very easy to set it up and it places responsibility on the student for learning through writing.

Advocates of dialogic journals seem to be saying that if students write about readings and lectures in a course in an unfamiliar discipline and if they regularly reflect in writing on their previous writings, they will deepen their understanding of course concepts and materials and be able to talk and write in more interesting ways. We were skeptical, however, because this seemed to leave students--especially under-prepared students--too much on their own to learn the ways of writing in unfamiliar disciplines.

Our thinking about the possibilities for systematic invention work, that is, frequent, assigned writing activities which would build toward an extended essay assignment, brought to mind George Hillock's work with inquiry activities and also the work of college-level epistemic curriculum builders like William Coles and Kenneth Dowst. We knew that comparison-group studies of systematic invention had demonstrated its effectiveness in certain contexts. We also knew from Hillock's research that carefully designed and sequenced inquiry activities produced gains in certain kinds of student writing, again, in particular contexts. I would now add John Bean's microthemes, which I learned about just yesterday in a fine workshop led by Chris Farris and Raymond Smith.

We wondered what would be best for our students in our courses. We knew we wanted better essays and better learning, and we believed that the way to get it was some kind of

frequent writing about course materials and concepts. Our question was "What kind of writing?" Let me sketch in briefly what we did and what we learned.

Our design met most of the criteria for comparison-group studies, but not all. Design strengths were that TAs taught at least two different comparison-groups, we were able to place observers in every section meeting of two of our three comparison groups, and our outcome measure was an extended three-hour first draft essay. Our context was a sophomore-level course in Chinese literature. Students read 17 short stories in translation from major periods in Chinese history. They also read some historical materials. The faculty member, a scholar with an international reputation, taught from a new historicist perspective. The big idea in the course was the tension between the individual and the collective. Four TAs led section discussions. Each TA taught 2 or 3 sections of 12-15 students, for a total of 10 sections. In three of the sections, students kept a Dialogic Journal, in three sections, what we called an Academic Journal. In four sections students did no journal writing at all. Students in all these sections wrote two essays and a few brief film reviews during the quarter.

With the faculty lecturer in the course, we wrote the final exam essay topic before the course began and then designed the Academic Journal activities to prepare students for the thinking/writing demands of this course's culminating writing occasion. These activities, 18 of them in all, required students to work both with high-level course generalizations and with concrete particulars of the short stories. Susan wrote the activities and sequenced and articulated them to engage students every week in the kind of learning and writing required in the course and assessed by the final-exam essay. For each activity students wrote at least a page but usually more. This writing, like the Dialogic Journal writing, launched discussions in section meetings. Our full report samples the Academic Journal sequence.

We scored the final essay exam three separate times: once for quality of argument, once for sophistication of claim, and a third time for amount and quality of relevant evidence. From these three scores, we created two further scores: an average score of these three and a weighted score in which the quality of argument score was weighted more than the other two. Scoring the three essay characteristics separately, as we did, allowed us to explore whether each kind of journal--Academic or Dialogic--contributed differently to achievement. Our end-of-course essay pointedly invited sophisticated claims and relevant evidence, and our Academic Journal assignments assumed students needed to practice both. We did not know, however, whether the practice was necessary--whether on their own writing in a Dialogic Journal about the short stories within the context of the lectures and section discussions, students would learn to write sophisticated claims supported by relevant evidence.

So--what did we learn? Our results show that students keeping an Academic Journal outperformed both students keeping a Dialogic Journal and students keeping no journal. They did so on all five essay scores--quality of argument, sophistication of claim, amount and quality of relevant evidence, the average score, and the weighted score favoring quality of argument--with most score differences being statistically significant. Students in the Dialogic Journal group performed no better than students in the group not writing a journal.

From secondary analyses, we learned that the superior scores of the Academic Journal group could not be attributed to TA, students' class level, or students' gender. Scores of the Academic Journal group were much less easy to predict from their verbal SAT scores: students with low verbal SAT scores performed better than expected. All of these secondary results make it seem likely that the Academic Journal assignments made a specific contribution to achievement in this Chinese literature course, where achievement is defined by performance on a three-hour, one-draft claim and evidence essay, an essay requiring students to bring together key course concepts with concrete evidence from several short stories.

Our study certainly does not allow us to conclude that a Dialogic Journal is the wrong assignment in a literature course with different learning and writing outcomes from those of our Chinese Literature course. Nor do we know whether Dialogic Journal students in our study benefited in ways not assessed by our claim-and-evidence essay. But our study does explain why our Academic Journal students wrote better essays. The explanation lies in the comparison between Academic and Dialogic journals, between what one offered that the other didn't. Would we generalize from our study? Yes, tentatively, to other UC San Diego courses with similar writing outcomes. And the draft of our report has been very helpful in justifying the Academic Journal work, as we have defined it, to faculty in various departments. Of course, we've marshalled other kinds of arguments, some anecdotal, some common-sensical, even some from Vygostkian learning theory and from stage theories of intellectual development like those of Perry, Belenky, Gilligan, and Basseches.

Now, recently, some have questioned whether such studies as ours can teach us anything about human learning. But consider. In our study, learning and writing were fully contextualized in a course with goals and materials that all of us recognize and respect, though any one of us might want to adjust or expand our professor's course goals. Students were not involved in a dehumanizing experiment, in a risky novelty. In fact, the professor teaches this course each year with very similar materials and with the same goals in mind. Since we were going on hunches about the relation of journal work to learning and writing, we weren't knowingly depriving any group in our comparison. The journal work was not an imposition. Students took it in stride. The end-of-course exam was not contrived. All undergraduate courses at UC San Diego end with a three-hour exam; and in the humanities students are often asked to write an essay. The essay topic invited students to demonstrate significant learning and many did so. Our patient readings of these essays searched out and credited one by one each student's learning. In our full report of this study, we illustrate this learning in selections from students' essays.

But then we combined all the scores and computed means, etc. Why bother? Why not simply describe a few students' learning case-study fashion? The only answer I can give is that we wanted to know what kind of frequent writing-to-learn was best for most students in this Chinese literature course and for certain sub-groups of students, like those least well prepared to write claim-and-evidence essays. We knew that we would be establishing the writing and learning activities in many such courses involving hundreds of students, and we didn't want to frustrate students and waste their time. We believed students could learn what our diverse general education courses offered, demonstrating their learning through discipline-appropriate writing, if we taught them how to do it. And since we had too many students to teach one at a time we needed to identify a method or strategy that would work for groups of students.

That's the best justification for comparison-group studies I can come up with at the moment. So long as we plan instruction for groups, we need comparison-group studies to evaluate the results of that instruction.

Fortunately this kind of curriculum-evaluation research is thriving and even showing a timely resurgence, I think. Check out the October 1991 issue of Research in the Teaching of English or the Summer 1991 issue of American Educational Research Journal. Consider the importance of Langer and Applebee's How Writing Shapes Thinking. From decades of experience with comparison-group studies we have evolved strong design criteria. George Hillock's helpful book Research on Written Composition remains the best resource. Most important, we've begun evaluating writing curricula and students' achievement in terms of specific kinds of learning and particular kinds of writing, acknowledging that even in young children, writing achievement is already richly diversified into one of our cultures most important resources, its defacto writing genres. I can't resist a footnote of amazement that either a constructivist or social-cognitive theory of writing could slight or ignore genre distinctions.

Let me conclude by saying that whatever the uses of comparison-group evaluation studies and whether they rise further or fall back in the next few years, I don't privilege them among other types of empirical studies of writing-to-learn. I'm not even arguing that comparison-group studies are the best way to evaluate instruction. Case studies and ethnographies carried out in the context of students' struggles to learn and write can--and have--informed us about what may go right or wrong in an instructional plan. Consider Walvoord and McCarthy's new book Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Study of Students in Four Disciplines.

Where our comparison-group study has led me is directly to my own case studies. You'll remember one of our most important findings: the low correlation--it was .142--of verbal SAT scores and essay scores in our Academic Journal group. By contrast, the correlation was .437 in the Dialogic Journal group. I now want to know more about just how the Academic Journal work contributed to low Verbal SAT students' learning. Case studies seem the obvious choice.

I relish this indirection from comparison-group to case study because conventional wisdom has it that case studies lead to comparison-group studies, that case studies can be justified only if they produce hypotheses to be tested in comparison-group studies.

I commend comparison-group studies only because their results contribute to reasoned argument about designing courses and giving writing assignments that will foster all students' learning.